



Chapter 17

Coyote & Roadrunner Races

The competitive events at the Albuquerque International Hot Air Balloon Fiesta are held during the week between the four mass ascensions held on the adjoining weekends. On Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday the balloons are divided into groups or flights. Each flight competes in either a Coyote and Roadrunner Race or a Tumbleweed Drop. Don't worry; an explanation for each of these two terms will follow. The remarkable thing about these events is that the winners are awarded no prize money. Everyone competes strictly for the fun of it. Oh, occasionally a sponsor of the Fiesta may give a winner a camera or a free dinner at a restaurant, but when you consider the cost of flying a balloon, it's obvious the participants are doing it for fun and not for profit.

The first event each day is a group of Coyote and Roadrunner Races. Outside the Southwest these are usually called Hare and Hound Races. Whatever the name, the object is the same. One balloon takes off as the leader (hare or roadrunner) and the rest of the balloons (coyotes or hounds) try to catch him. During Fiesta this gets a little wild, because several roadrunners are turned loose at the same time. Each flight of coyotes is composed of about thirty balloons and has its own roadrunner to chase. Sometimes in the confusion you forget which one you are after and chase the wrong one. I've even seen balloonists give up trying to catch one roadrunner because the winds were carrying them the wrong way and chase another one instead. In this case, if you won, you wouldn't be

scored because you caught the wrong bird, but there is a certain amount of satisfaction in finally getting your balloon to go someplace you want it to go. It's all for fun anyway.

Occasionally we had a choice of several balloons or roadrunners to chase in the same race. In one race the Black Angus Restaurant chain had assembled its "herd" of three balloons. Each one was decorated with a distinctive Black Angus brand on the side. They were going to launch together and try to stay in a close group. When they landed, each crew was going to lay out a large white cross made of plastic sheeting. The coyotes would have a choice of which cross to try to land on. The balloons would be scored on how close each coyote could land to the center of a cross. The overall winners would be the three balloons which landed the closest, even though all three may have picked the same cross as a target.

We inflated Sundancer and were ready to go. I looked around the group to see whose turn it was to fly. I picked Judy to help me keep track of the movements of the three lead balloons. I had a feeling this was going to be a little bit more difficult race than usual. My brother Kenneth was down for the Fiesta and had brought along a girlfriend named Vivian. She had never been up in a balloon before. What the heck! I might just as well give her a ride to remember.

"Well, Vivian, how about you?" I asked. "Want to go for a ride?"

She looked at me like someone had jabbed her with a pin and then attempted to get into the gondola. She found there is no graceful way to get into a hot air balloon gondola. First she tried to get one leg in and couldn't get it high enough to clear the edge, even with two people holding her. Then she tried to kneel gracefully on the side of the gondola and crawl over the edge. The side of the wicker basket flexed just as she thought she was balanced and she swung wildly to the inside, hanging onto one upright and yelling in a most undignified manner. I caught her with one hand and, between Judy and I, we were able to get her feet inside along with rest of her body.

"That's a heck of a lot harder than it looks," she laughed.

"Cal, the Angus balloons are taking off," Roy said. I looked around. The rest of the balloons in our flight were ready and the roadrunners were on their way.

"OK, everybody get set. We'll be leaving in about ten minutes. Just keep a small amount of weight on the basket. I want to stay buoyant."

The three balloons drifted off in a tight group and ascended. We watched them closely. To catch them, I essentially had to duplicate their movements. This meant watching their flight pattern and then trying to follow it. The trio drifted south until they were about 300 feet above the ground and then headed north. Soon the three roadrunners were directly overhead and moving at about five or six miles an hour.

"Good, that means we should be able to go up quickly and catch the same air current and maybe get a little closer to them."

Our launch director was headed across the field toward us. The downwind balloons in our flight were already in the air. "Are you ready?"

"You bet—let's go."

The crew cheered as we lifted off. The excitement of the anticipated chase was clear on their upturned faces as we looked down at them. I grinned at Judy and Vivian. "Watch the other balloons around us and keep me informed on what they're doing. I think we have a good chance today."

The Angus herd had climbed to about 1,000 feet above the ground and was already trying to lose the rest of us by trying to pick wind currents we couldn't follow. On the way up to join them Sundancer passed through at least three layers of air moving in different directions. Judy noted the altitude and depth of each stream of air as we moved into it and wrote them down on a piece of paper so we wouldn't forget it in the excitement. The roadrunners moved up and down through these layers to try and confuse the coyotes. Each time they changed altitude 200 feet or more, they moved off in a different direction. The three pilots were good because the trio of balloons seemed to move almost as one. I suspected that they were in radio contact or the coordination of movement wouldn't have been so precise.

"How're you going to catch them?" Vivian asked. The roadrunners were about half a mile ahead of us by now and had once again changed altitude and direction, heading more to the west.

"The trick is to not to try to follow them too quickly. I'll stay at the altitude they were flying until we get to the same point they were before they descended and then we'll descend to follow them. If I descend any earlier, we'll be flying parallel to them, but not on the same path. If that doesn't work, I may be able to pick up a crosswind to bring me closer. That's why Judy is keeping track of the altitude and wind directions at various altitudes. I'd like to get in pretty close fairly early in the chase because the winds could change at any time. If I'm too far behind, we may get blown clear off course."

We followed to the point where I thought they had flown and then descended. Sure enough, we lined up directly behind the three balloons. Judy grinned at me. It was a challenge and she knew how I liked to win. The game of cat and mouse continued for about an hour more, and then the three Angus balloons descended to just above the ground and lined up on a large field. At this point we had dropped back to about a mile north of the three balloons and the trio was spread out only about thirty yards apart. I marveled at the excellent coordination the three roadrunner balloons had exhibited throughout over an hour and a half of flying. I dropped Sundancer down through the layers of air until I found two layers heading in slightly different directions between ground level and about 200 feet up. The roadrunner balloons landed and the ground crews quickly spread out the large white crosses at the points of contact. Then the three balloons flew on about fifty yards further and sat back down to watch the fun.

"What happens now?" Vivian asked.

"See those two balloons ahead of us?" Judy pointed to two of the coyotes in our flight that had taken off earlier. "They will attempt to land as close as possible to the center of one of the crosses and then drop a sandbag with their balloon name and number. As soon as they touch down they're supposed to fly on so the rest of us will have a clear target."

"Does that mean they'll win?"

"No, we'll each get a chance to come closer. The winner is the one that lands closest to the center of any one of the three crosses."

I watched the other two balloons land and then fly on. They had done quite well. It was going to be a close race, and the

winner would probably have to be within twenty feet of the center of a cross or not expect to place at all. I had already picked the cross I wanted to try to hit and jockeyed the balloon up and down in altitude to correct my aim.

"Cal, there's a balloon coming in on your left." Judy pointed to a red and green striped balloon that appeared to be converging with us. "How can he be doing that? We're both at the same altitude."

"I don't know. Ask whoever creates the crazy weather around here. I guess he has a faster air stream over there that crosses ours someplace down the field."

Soon the other balloon passed us and pulled ahead. It appeared he was going to land just to our right, which was just fine. This left us lined up dead center on the cross I was aiming for. I wasn't worried about hitting him, because I expected him to just touch, drop his marker bag and move on. Instead, the red and green balloon landed and stayed there. At first I couldn't believe it; then I could see the pilot talking to someone on the ground and not paying any attention to me.

"Hey! Get the hell out of the way!" I hollered in vain.

Finally he looked around. Sundancer must have looked like a freight train coming down a track. The pilot started pouring some heat into the balloon, but it was too little and too late. I could see trying to fly over him was impossible. The gondola on Sundancer would catch the side of his balloon and probably tear a large hole. I could only do one thing to try to keep from hitting him, and I did it. I pulled the vent rope hard, and we hit and dragged along the ground well ahead of the coveted cross. Sundancer slowed and the other balloon finally began to move away. I dropped our marker bag, cursing under my breath and poured the heat to Sundancer. There were other balloons coming up on our backside and I had to be out of their way or risk the danger of the same kind of accident. We sailed directly over the center of the cross as we moved on. I'm afraid I said a few uncomplimentary things to the other balloonist as we flew by. At least, I am told the heat from my words did a considerable amount in helping Sundancer gain altitude.

The loss of the race hurt, but it helps explain why there are no monetary prizes at the Albuquerque International Fiesta. If there had been a \$1,000 winners purse at stake instead of

just a steak dinner at a Black Angus Restaurant, I might have been less willing to abort my flight in order to keep from hitting another balloon. As it was, only my pride was hurt and some sympathetic words from friends and a couple bottles of beer did wonders to make the whole thing settle into perspective. It was all for fun and I might not have won anyway. At least I would be ready to fly tomorrow and tomorrow there was another race.